



REFLECTIONS  
ON GOVERNING RESPONSIBILITY  
AND CAMPAIGN POLITICS

*111th Congress Stennis Fellows*

## The 111th Congress John C. Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows

came together across party lines from both chambers of Congress to examine the core theme of *Balancing Governing Responsibility and Campaign Politics*. Nominated by Members of Congress and selected by an independent selection committee, the 30 staff leaders with over 300 years combined experience on Capitol Hill began meeting together in July 2009. The objective was to engage in real dialogue and build trust across the boundaries of party and chamber, and to develop and explore an agenda they and others could pursue to improve the balance between governing and campaigning in Congress.

Despite vastly different political perspectives, the Stennis Fellows were able to discover significant common ground. They initially identified three broad questions to pursue together related to the theme of *Balancing Governing Responsibility and Campaign Politics*:

- ★ How have personal relationships and partisanship changed over time within Congress?
- ★ Can governing responsibility and campaign demands co-exist productively?
- ★ How can Congress strengthen two-way communication with the public and improve governing in the new media environment?

These broad questions provided the framework for a series of half-day roundtable discussions where guest experts were invited to explore the questions with the Fellows.<sup>1</sup>

Using dialogue and building trust were essential starting points for the 111th Congress Stennis Fellows. They explored dialogue as a step that can be taken to uncover assumptions, share and broaden perspectives, and find common ground. The Fellows found that dialogue is not a substitute for debate, negotiation or decision-making. It *precedes* them. But dialogue creates the shared language, mutual trust and understanding that can make subsequent negotiation or decision-making more productive. They also credited the purposeful use of dialogue as a key element in the success of their time together during the 111th Congress.

Stennis Fellows looked at the historical aspects of governing and campaigning, examined current trends, and explored wide-ranging ideas on campaigning and governing influences. The Fellows also considered how the balance can be improved to provide more time and resources to the governing process. Increasing partisan tensions, within Congress and among the electorate, were identified as the core (both cause and effect) of the increasing encroachment of campaigning on governing.

Concerns about media coverage of Congress also were extensively discussed. While news sources have greatly expanded through new media and social network technologies, news reporting is less objective and national news organizations are cutting back research staff. Increasingly, there is no trustworthy arbiter of Congressional news coverage – a reality that leads to distortion and confusion of the facts. News coverage in both the traditional and “new” media seems to be increasingly divisive.

The Fellows agreed that there is some inherent tension between campaigning and governing. Campaigning accentuates differences while governing requires building consensus. However, as campaigning becomes more complex,

demanding and expensive, obstacles to consensus building seem more daunting than ever. Not only does news coverage put more emphasis on conflict, but ever-growing pressures on Members of Congress to continually raise more money for the next election also pulls Members away from the governing process and focuses more of their time and attention on campaigning.

Stennis Fellows examined many ideas that might move the emphasis from campaigning to governing in the future. In doing so, they recognized that the constitutional limits to some reform proposals and the political forces that have made governing increasingly challenging are both strong and difficult to stem. Finding real solutions to improve the situation is an immense challenge which the Fellows could only begin to address.

At the conclusion of the roundtables, the Fellows identified three main initiatives they and others could pursue to better balance governing and campaigning, along with a number of more specific suggestions of what could be done to advance each initiative:



*Stennis Fellows met in plenary and small groups to explore issues related to the balance between governing responsibility and campaign politics*

<sup>1</sup> A list of the guest experts who met with the Fellows is appended.

## Public Engagement and Media

*To engage the public more fully in the governing process, not just in campaigns; and to encourage balanced media coverage of governance issues. In the current environment, citizens are seen more as targeted voters than as engaged and informed partners who are integral to the governing process. And media (including new media) too often report governance issues principally in the context of the permanent campaign.*

### EXAMPLES OF STEPS THAT COULD BE EXPLORED TO ADVANCE THIS INITIATIVE

- ★ Use new media and communications technologies to help citizens become better informed and more engaged in governing. For example:
  - ☆ Update and simplify House and Senate rules on the use of the web and social networking tools;
  - ☆ Re-evaluate whether adequate resources are allocated to this function;
  - ☆ Develop on-line games as one technique for outreach, especially to younger people.
- ★ Examine the impact of the media on the balance between campaigning and governing, for example:
  - ☆ Encourage development of an independent rating system for media, including new media, on their reliability and how well they report on all sides of public issues;
  - ☆ Convene a conference on the impact of the media (old and new) on Congress;
  - ☆ Consider the relationship between Congress and the media as the theme for a future class of Stennis Fellows.
- ★ Request a CRS/GAO report on what is currently being spent on civic education by government and the private sector.
- ★ Make greater use of the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) to engage people in learning about Congress and what Members do every day. For example, circulate the CVC orientation video and related materials to schools.
- ★ Provide access to the Legislative Information System to schools and public libraries.
- ★ Engage the public by making civics more relevant; frame the problem — A civics crisis in the United States. Bring in respected opinion leaders from inside and outside government to form a Commission on Civics.

## Promote a More Even Playing Field for Governing and Campaigning

*To reduce the demands of campaigns and fundraising so that more time can be devoted to governing.*

### EXAMPLES OF STEPS THAT COULD BE EXPLORED TO ADVANCE THIS INITIATIVE

- ★ Recognize that creating four-year House terms, shortening election cycles, and broader campaign finance reforms are fundamental changes that require constitutional amendment. In the short-term, encourage public understanding and a grass-roots movement to advance such longer-term reforms.
- ★ Look for ways to dramatically reduce or even ban campaign fundraising in off years for House Members, and in the first four years of a Senate term.
- ★ Develop a non-partisan rating system for the role played by Members in governing. Provide public recognition (and, thus, an incentive) for those who devote more time and effort to getting legislation and oversight done well.
- ★ Identify cases where bipartisanship and bipartisan legislation made the country better. Use those examples as a basis to encourage leaders on both sides to reach across the aisle after the election, and to build public understanding and support for leaders who seek bipartisan solutions.



*Stennis Fellows met in West Virginia to develop agenda for Fellowship*

## Building Trust Within Congress to Earn Public Trust

*To build and maintain the level of trust, both among Members and between the public and Congress, on which effective governing depends. Campaigning can undermine that trust both among Members and with the public.*

### EXAMPLES OF STEPS THAT COULD BE EXPLORED TO ADVANCE THIS INITIATIVE

- ★ Create more opportunities for dialogue and relationship-building among both Members and staff (including lunches, dinners, non-partisan meetings on shared interests, bipartisan travel, recreational activities, and community service), and involve families in some of the activities.
- ★ Give the public a better chance locally to see how Congress can work, for example, encourage more field hearings and public meetings of bipartisan delegations in different localities and engage the public in these meetings (give them a greater role).
- ★ Provide opportunities for new Members from different parties to work together. For example, freshman Members could have their own committee that could foster bipartisan ideas and legislation and have a class agenda.
- ★ Pair Members from different parties and chambers, for example to:
  - ☆ Do more outreach to college students, similar to the current Congress to Campus program that sends former Members of Congress to college campuses;
  - ☆ Participate in non-partisan meetings on substantive issues (e.g., The Aspen Institute);
  - ☆ Visit projects together to learn about different parts of the country and their concerns.
- ★ Strengthen the role of Congressional committees (where relationships of trust are more easily established), reversing the trend that has increased the influence of leadership while diminishing the influence of committees.

## Conclusion

The trust-building and respectful dialogues that were hallmarks of this Fellowship are steps in the right direction on which Stennis Fellows believe they can build. Fellows, both individually and in smaller groups, plan to advance a number of the initiatives described in this report. Perhaps as important, they are looking to broaden the dialogue, begun in this Fellowship, to others both on the Hill and beyond.

The Fellows also agreed that creating more opportunities like the Stennis Fellows program to enable Members of Congress and Congressional staff to come together in a non-partisan venue to build trust and explore over-arching governing concerns would be worthwhile. Such opportunities have decreased over the years as partisanship has become increasingly bitter. As a result, reaching consensus through the governing process has become more difficult.

Finding ways to better balance governing and campaigning in the face of political and other realities is a huge challenge. Many more will need to become engaged in order to find effective ways forward and the process of building trust and understanding through dialogue that the Fellows experienced is a promising starting point for that effort. Already there are examples of Fellows working together across the boundaries of chamber and party to find practical solutions to particular issues. Perhaps in a deeper sense, though, the process of building trust through dialogue — and creating more spaces for that to happen — is not only a way to find solutions, it is part of the solution.



*111th Congress Stennis Fellows at their closing retreat*

## Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows

111th Congress

### **Sanders Adu**

*Staff Director and Counsel*  
Domestic Monetary  
Policy Subcommittee  
  
House Committee  
on Financial Services

### **Robert A. Cochran**

*Chief of Staff*  
U.S. Representative Buck McKeon

### **Pamela Day**

*Chief of Staff*  
U.S. Representative Don Young

### **Ken Flanz**

*Legislative Director*  
U.S. Senator Mike Crapo

### **Jennifer Goedke**

*Deputy Chief of Staff*  
U.S. Representative Lynn Woolsey

### **Paul Grove**

*Clerk*  
State, Foreign Operations, and  
Related Programs Subcommittee  
  
Senate Committee  
on Appropriations

### **Kate Hallahan**

*Clerk*  
Subcommittee on Transportation,  
HUD, Related Agencies  
  
House Committee  
on Appropriations

### **T.A. Hawks**

*Chief of Staff*  
U.S. Senator Thad Cochran

### **Edward Hild**

*Legislative Director*  
U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski

### **Leigh Hildebrand**

*Assistant Parliamentarian*  
Office of the Senate Parliamentarian

### **Joshua Johnson**

*Professional Staff Member*  
Senate Committee on Energy  
and Natural Resources

### **Charles Kieffer**

*Clerk*  
Homeland Security Subcommittee  
  
Senate Committee  
on Appropriations

### **Jessica Lewis**

*National Security Advisor*  
Office of the  
Senate Majority Leader

### **Tom Mahr**

*Legislative Director*  
U.S. Senator Kent Conrad

### **Damon Nelson**

*Deputy Chief of Staff  
and Legislative Director*  
U.S. Representative Devin Nunes

### **Richard Patrick**

*Floor Assistant/  
Appropriations Assistant*  
U.S. Representative Ed Pastor

### **Martha Scott Poindexter**

*Minority Staff Director*  
Senate Committee on Agriculture,  
Nutrition and Forestry

### **Randi Reid**

*Legislative Director*  
U.S. Senator Mike Enzi

### **John Righter**

*Deputy Staff Director*  
Senate Committee on the Budget

### **Kristen Sarri**

*Democratic Professional Staff*  
Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and  
Coast Guard Subcommittee  
  
Senate Committee on Commerce,  
Science and Transportation

### **Lisa Sherman**

*Chief of Staff*  
U.S. Representative Susan Davis

### **Elizabeth Stanley**

*Chief of Staff*  
U.S. Representative Nita Lowey

### **Nien Su**

*Republican Staff Director*  
Subcommittee on Asia, Pacific  
and Global Environment  
  
House Committee  
on Foreign Affairs

### **Askia Suruma**

*Deputy Staff Director*  
House Committee  
on Ways and Means

### **Julie Tippens**

*Chief of Staff*  
U.S. Representative David Wu

### **David Watkins**

*Staff Director*  
National Parks, Forests and  
Public Lands Subcommittee  
  
House Committee  
on Natural Resources

### **Lynne Weil**

*Communications Director*  
House Committee  
on Foreign Affairs

### **Debra Bailey Whitman**

*Majority Staff Director*  
Senate Special Committee  
on Aging

# Appendix

## *Roundtable Resources*

Roundtables were conducted at the National Archives and the Newseum in Washington, DC and at the National Constitution Center and Omni at Independence Park in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Guest experts who met with the Stennis Fellows during the roundtables were:

- ★ Sarah Binder, Professor of Political Science at George Washington University and a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution;
- ★ Michael X. Delli Carpini, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania;
- ★ Mickey Edwards, former U.S. Representative, currently Vice President of the Aspen Institute and visiting lecturer at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University;
- ★ David Eisenhower, Public Policy Fellow at the Annenberg School for Communication and the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania;
- ★ Pat Griffin, Academic Director of the Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute for the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University and Partner at Griffin Williams Critical Point Management
- ★ John Lapinski, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania and Director of the Elections Unit at NBC News;
- ★ Marjorie Margolies, former U.S. Representative from Pennsylvania and currently President of Women's Campaign International;
- ★ Lee Rainie, Director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project;
- ★ Jan Schaffer, Executive Director of J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland;
- ★ Frank Sesno, Director of the School of Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University;
- ★ Jim Snider, President of iSolon.org.

Prior to the roundtables the Stennis Fellows convened at the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC) in Shepherdstown, West Virginia for a workshop on using dialogue to advance understanding and achieve better decisions, and also to finalize their learning agenda for the roundtables. The Stennis Fellows returned to the NCTC toward the end of the program to synthesize what they had learned across the roundtables and to consider implications for the future of Congress.



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